but you've seen me bare, and seen me covered up (maybe i'm not scared) by barbiewrites

Series: you sit and pray, hoping that the stars align [2]
Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)
Genre: 5 Times, 5+1 Things, Angst with a Happy Ending, Background Joyce Byers, Billy's Mom - Freeform, Bob Newby is Mentioned, Cookies, Fluff and Angst, Happy Ending, M/M, Neil Hargrove Being an Asshole, Neil Hargrove gets what he Deserves, Sneaking Around, Steve eats Jello, Susan deserves better, lemonade
Language: English
Characters: Billy Hargrove, Jonathan Byers, Maxine "Max" Mayfield, Nancy Wheeler, Neil Hargrove, Steve Harrington, Susan Hargrove
Relationships: Billy Hargrove & Maxine "Max" Mayfield, Billy Hargrove & Susan Hargrove, Billy Hargrove/Steve Harrington, Jonathan Byers/Nancy Wheeler, Minor or Background Relationship(s)
Status: Completed
Published: 2018-01-23
Updated: 2018-01-23
Packaged: 2022-04-20 16:29:26
Rating: Not Rated
Warnings: Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings
Chapters: 1
Words: 6,774
Publisher: archiveofourown.org
Summary:

Five times Susan looks out for Billy and the one time he looks out for her.

but you've seen me bare, and seen me covered up (maybe i'm not scared)

Author's Note:

> unbeta'd, all mistakes are mine. title is from bare by wildes.

1.

There are two days of school left, despite finals being over. The last two days are more for looks than they are real school - you sit around with your friends, smoke out under the bleachers and the teachers pretend not to see (or smell), sign yearbooks and say goodbyes.

Steve and Billy had been sitting out at a picnic table under an oak tree near the parking lot when Nancy Wheeler bounded up to them, Byers in tow.

"I'm gonna miss you *so* much," She says, lightly slapping Steve's arm when she finishes telling them all about how her family is going out to their family home in North Carolina for a reunion.

"I'm sure your extended family is gonna keep you plenty busy," Steve muses, sticking another bite of his jello cup into his mouth.

"Completely different descriptions of 'busy.' It's going to be a train wreck, I know it. The only person my age going is Louise and I know all she's gonna do is bitch about her new step-dad and what a hardass he is," Nancy explains, rolling her eyes as she spoke.

Billy snorts out a laugh. “Yeah. Step-parents are always pretty shit. You can’t get away from that,” Nancy frowns at him, seemingly unimpressed.

Steve can see Jonathan shift uncomfortably behind his girlfriend, then glance around them. “Nance, we should-”

“Yeah.” She agrees, eyes switching back to Steve. “I’ll see you when I get back,” She promises, then turns on the ball of her foot and walks away quickly with Jonathan keeping pace.

“I dunno why you even get on your step mom that much,” Steve says, watching the couple enter the building and filling his mouth with more cherry jello. “She’s crazy nice.”

It’s Billy’s turn to pull a face, scrunching up his eyebrows in confusion. “You been hanging around with Susan?” He scoffs.

“Yeah.” Billy blinks, blanches at his boyfriend. “What, she didn’t tell you?”

“Why the fuck were you talking to her?” Billy asks, heart starting to pound. He knows, objectively, that he should be fine. That a guy showing up and looking for Billy didn’t immediately mean they were fucking, that if Susan hadn’t already ratted him out to Neil she probably wouldn’t. That being said, it didn’t mean she couldn’t mention it in passing. A friendly ‘a boy showed up for you last week’ could end with Billy losing teeth.

“Relax, Jesus,” Steve laughs, looking to his jello cup as he scrapes the sides clean. “I went to surprise you and you weren’t home. She gave me lemonade.”

Billy’s stunned silence prompts him to look up, and Steve laughs again. “I’m not *actually* dumb, you know? It’s not like I showed up saying ‘oh, is Billy home? I wanted to suck him off.’”

Billy looks around them. “Lower your fucking voice.” He warns, then turns back to Steve when he’s certain no one had heard them. “You can’t do that shit.”

“What, tell your mom we’re dating? No shit.” Steve laughs, shaking his head.

“She’s not my fucking mom.” Billy replies gruffly, prompting Steve to raise a hand in surrender. “I meant show up to my house. Unannounced like that.”

“You do it to me all the time.”

“You don’t have fucking parents.”

“Okay, dramatic. I *have* parents.”

“Who spend more time in their cars than they do in their house.”

Steve cocks his head, as if he's considering it. "Fair, but - I'm subtle. I won't do it if it's that big of a deal, I guess."

"Thank you, Christ." Billy reaches for his necklace, running the pad of his thumb over the smooth back of the charm. "What the hell'd you two clowns talk about, anyway?" Billy asks after a few moments of Steve trying to dig the last bits of jello from his cup.

"Uh," Steve says, drawing the syllable out. "Dunno. I showed up, knocked on the door, asked if you were around. She said you'd run off like always -"

"Those *her* words?"

Steve sends him a look. "No. I said I'd leave but she said I could wait a little while if I wanted, then she was offering me cookies and drinks and all this shit and - you know how I am. She showed me you and Max's baby pictures." Steve chews on his spoon for the hell of it before Billy swats at his hand, knocking it out of his mouth. "Then, it was, like, getting closer to four and she said I might wanna think about leaving so I," He jerks his head off towards the woods, but Billy gets the message.

Billy presses the heels of his hands into his eyes, hardly believing that his boyfriend had sat around for lemonade and cookies with his step mother. "You are damn lucky you're cute, Harrington."

2.

It's the third week of summer when Billy realizes he has the house more or less to himself. Neil still works from 8 to 5, Max is either at camp or one of her little friends' houses in a day-long D&D campaign, and Susan has fucked right off somewhere else. Billy thinks she found herself a friend or two. If she isn't out, she's doing-it-herself. One day she's peeling down old wallpaper and putting new ones up, the next she's out in the backyard arranging bricks to make herself a garden. She's rarely in the house itself, and when she is, she's concerned only with what she's doing.

Some days when Billy comes home from hanging out with Steve or dropping Max off somewhere and she's in the house, she'll offer him a glass of juice or a sandwich. The response is always the same - a wordless dismissal as he heads to his room. He knows he needs to appreciate that she didn't rat him out, but he can't tell if she sat Steve down because she could *tell* or because she was lonely and wanted someone to *talk* to for once.

Billy bites the bullet and invites Steve over the same week.

It isn't the first time he's ever been over, but it's the first time Billy's let him use the front door or not park at the start of the driveway. Steve's pretty smug about it all.

No one is home when the two of them show up and Steve makes himself at home in Billy's room.

It's not the same as spending the day in the sun out at Steve's pool, but Steve loves it. Just being in here, knowing Billy feels comfortable enough to have Steve over casually like this, it makes his heart swell.

Neil is still a secret, and as far as Steve knows, Billy just has a knack for pissing people off. Steve makes him promise to get in fewer fights.

Even in his naivety, Steve knows being allowed in Billy's house like this is a big step for them.

"Who am I?" Steve asks, turning around. His shirt is hanging by a single button, his jeans pulled high on his waist. Billy's leather jacket is loose on his shoulders and he steps over quickly, plucking Billy's cigarette from his fingers.

"Hey -" Billy starts, reaching for the cig, then Steve holds a finger out, silently telling him to wait.

"Looks like we got ourselves a new keg king!" Steve says, doing a horrible imitation of Billy's voice. "Thats how you do it, Hawkins!" Steve says, after a puff of his cigarette and a fist in the air, "Thats how you do it!" Steve sticks his tongue out, shaking his hand wildly in the air.

"Shut the fuck up," Billy responds, but he's laughing, and rising to his knees to tug Steve back to the bed. The older follows easily, passing the cigarette back to the other as they settle, Steve tucked under his

arm. “You weren’t even *there* for that. I thought you were busy being broken up with.”

Months ago that would’ve stung - but Billy’s since made it clear that he’s not planning on skipping town, that he takes them seriously - but now Steve wiggles a finger under Billy’s rib, making him jump and let out a squeal. “I heard all about it, believe it or not.”

“Yeah, I’m sure you did.” Billy takes a long hit of his cigarette and pulling Steve in by the collar of *Billy’s* jacket. It’s a quick exchange of smoke that Steve blows right back into his face.

“You’re real funny,” Steve replies, reaching for the stick and Billy matches the movement, pulling it away.

“Here,” He says instead, avoiding Steve’s outstretched hand and bringing it right to his mouth, holding it there while he takes a drag. “Sit up.”

Steve does so without hesitation rising up on his knees and raising his eyebrows, letting out the smoke. “What for?”

Billy’s smirk grows as he looks Steve over. “Nothin’,” Billy answers, chest puffed out as he ashes his cigarette onto his side table. “You just look damn good in my clothes.”

He’s met with a scoff, and Steve crawling back over to him. “You’re just trying to get lucky.”

Billy barked out a laugh, then made a move to slap Steve's ass. "So what?" He brings his cigarette back to Steve's lips and the two share another drag. "Did it work?"

Steve sends him a knowing grin before surging up to kiss him.

Two hours later and they're lying in Billy's bed, covered only with his sheets, the post sex glow heavy on their skin. Steve had been harping on and on about needing a shower, and yet he's the one asleep on Billy's chest as the younger enjoys a cigarette.

He's looking down at Steve's sleeping below him. His eyelashes are fanned out over his cheeks, his skin - still pale despite his recent time in the sun - is punctuated by moles across his cheeks. He presses a hand through Steve's hair and his chest swells with affection, with the helpless thought that he's really, truly and terribly, in love with this boy.

Billy doesn't know what he'll do when Steve leaves. Everything is up in the air for now - he knows he isn't going to university, but he still has options. He could go out and travel for a year, find someone better than Billy who knows where they're going in life, who isn't so tightly wound and ready to snap at any second. There's a junior college in Evansville that Steve's been talking about, and yet even the bigger city worries Billy, because bigger cities mean more anonymity means people who aren't as scared means Billy's got competition.

The last person Billy trusted this much was his mother.

He relaxes into his pillow, cigarette hanging from his lips and his

hand tracing patterns into Steve's side. There's a song playing softly, but he hasn't listened to it enough to be able to name it. Steve picked the tape, and the two of them listen to pretty different stuff. Steve listens to *Elvis*, even in his free time.

There's a soft rap at his door before its pushed open.

Billy jumps, waking Steve - who freaks out at the intrusion and scampers off the bed and onto the floor, yanking on the first pair of underwear he sees and scrambling for his jeans.Billy holds ahand out to the door, keeping the sheet securely around him and yet, ready to jump forward if his father were to make a move at Steve. Neil would have to kill him before he laid a finger on Steve.

Susan, on the other side of the door yelps at the sight, shutting it quickly. Her hand stays on the knob tentatively, and a tension in the air nearly suffocating. Her left covers her open mouth as she leans in, listening to Billy's - *friend?* - scramble to get dressed. She can hear Billy, too, cursing as he pulls clothes on.

"Billy?" She calls through the door. There's a shuffle.

He surges for the door, ready to pull it open and harp at her for coming in unannounced like that, for barging in. Steve can see it, the knee-jerk reaction of rage coming to him oh-so-easily. He puts a hand on Billy's chest before he can drag the door open, holding him back.

Steve pulls him close, into a hug. "It's fine, Billy. She didn't know." And Billy opens his mouth to speak - Steve knows he'll insist it's not fine - and Steve shakes his head. "What's she going to do about it?"

“Tell my fucking - Neil?” Billy asks, choking on the word ‘dad.’

“And what? What proof?” Steve asks, and shakes his head. “We’re fine. I’ll just - I’m just gonna go, and maybe she won’t even mention it, right?”

“That’s not how this fucking -“ He’s once again cut off by the door opening, and Steve steps away, the both of them turning to look at Susan’s widened blue-greens.

“Billy, I -“ She starts, and he interrupts her at the first chance he can.

“Need to stop fuckin’ barging in like you own the place, okay? You don’t get to pick and choose when to play -“ It’s Steve’s turn to cut in.

“Billy, let’s not -“ He cuts himself off, turns to Susan. “Sorry, okay. I - shouldn’t be here, I can go and we can all forget about this, yeah?” He asks, nodding.

She takes a breath and blinks between the two boys, seeming to not really know what to say before she focuses her gaze on her step-son. “I just wanted to say I’ll be going to pick Maxine up, then your father. We’re going to see a film and eat, so. We’ll be back at ten,” She says, then purses her lips and tries for a smile. “You boys be good.”

The door shuts and the two teens stand there in a stunned silence, listening to her shut the front door, then the growl of her car being started.

“See it’s -“

“I swear to God, Steve, if you tell me this is fucking *fine* -“

“It *is*.” Steve reaches out, wraps his arms around his boyfriend’s shoulders and pulls him in.

“She’s gonna -“

“She’s not.” Steve promises, pulling Billy back down to the bed. “It’s gonna be fine, okay? No one’s gonna find out. She would’ve been mad, right?”

Billy doesn’t answer. What he does do, instead, is tuck his head into Steve’s shoulder and clenches his eyes so tight he can’t let any tears out, clutches Steve so close, so tight Steve waits a few minutes before admitting he can’t really breathe, and chews his lips so raw that Steve has to remind him to stop opening up the cuts.

3.

“Billy, you can pick Max up from the Wheelers’ at nine, home no later than nine-thirty.” Neil says over dinner, the three Hargroves grouped around their dinner table.

Billy hates the “grounding” rule. It means no car, and no sleeping anywhere other than his own bed, but other than that, everything is normal. It makes parties miserable, because he can’t go anywhere other than the party, he’s gotta leave at fucking eleven-thirty, and his *parents* pick him up. “I told you I was goin’ to a party tonight.”

Neil, as usual, does not care. “You should have thought about that before you started carrying pot around. I can take you to your party.”

Susan shifts in her chair, raises another small bite of spaghetti to her lips.

“You’re not takin’ me to a party.” Billy replies, because the party is not a party at all, but rather an excuse to go see Steve.

“Watch your tone.” Neil replies gravely, setting his cutlery down and sending Billy a daring look, just *asking* him to step out of line. “You can go to your party. Where is it?”

If there *were* a party going on tonight, he could just give that address, but it’s still summer and the only person he talks to from school is Steve — and Steve was expecting him tonight. “1417 Fairchild.” He answers, because at this point, his father isn’t going to take ‘no’ as an answer, especially not when it means potentially humiliating his son.

“I could take him.”

Both Hargrove men turn to look at Susan, who has just dabbed her lips clean with her paper napkin.

“No, no. He’s my son —“

“I can take him,” interrupting him is a ballsy move, and she feels the back of her neck heat up, “you have an early morning tomorrow, and you shouldn’t be out driving so late. It’ll be nice if I pick Max up for once, and I need to drop something in the post box anyway.” While she speaks, she rises, picking up Neil’s dirty dish and bringing it to the sink.

“Billy doesn’t know how to behave with you, Susan, and I don’t think he’ll respect you.”

Susan shakes her head, her cropped red hair swinging gently, “Well, if we never give him any chances to get better, how’s he supposed to improve. And, hey, isn’t that game coming on tonight? With the Olympics?” She asks, setting her hands on her hips as she looks to him. He gives her a puzzled look, but eventually hums, sits back in his seat.

Neil eventually nods, seeming to remember mentioning a game. Billy realizes he’s less important than a sports game.

Susan ends up taking Billy over just before she goes to pick Max up. It’s full of one-sided conversation on Susan’s part, and silence from an uncomfortable Billy.

“The weather doesn’t seem to be too far off from California, at least. It’s a little wetter out here, but that doesn’t mean it’s a bad thing.”

“Max really liked that movie we saw, The Karate Kid? I wonder if she’d like to take any classes like that.”

“Perhaps it’s better that we moved out here when we did. That shooting was only a few miles away from the park.”

“We’ve been thinking about starting to go to Church out here.”

“I hope we win in the Games tonight.”

When she pulls into Steve’s driveway, he gets out and slams the door before she can comment on the lack of people. She reminds herself it isn’t her business and drives off to get Max.

“Hello to you, too,” Steve says as Billy barges into his room, kicking his boots off and diving for the bed. Billy says something into the mattress. “I didn’t catch that,” Steve replies, and moves his pen and notebook off the bed.

“I’m going to fucking die tonight.”

Steve makes a vague noise of sympathy, pushes his hand under Billy’s shirt to rub his back, only to be met with Billy twisting around to shove them away.

“Why’re your hands always so fuckin’ cold?”

Steve spends two hours trying to console Billy, attempting to convince him that ‘no, baby, this isn’t the last time I’m gonna see you’ and eventually settling on agreeing for Billy to call Steve’s by

midnight to promise he was okay.

It doesn't mean Billy is feeling confident about going home. He's expecting Neil to show up, given that he doesn't expect Susan to want to go out driving when she didn't have to, seeing that Max was probably asleep by now. He wanted to be *outside* by the time the car pulled up, but Steve had found the most efficient way of making him not think that he was hours away from dying was kissing — and unfortunately, that didn't help much with time keeping.

"Shit, shit, shit, shit, fuck, shit," Billy hisses as he sprints halfway down the stairs, realizes he's forgotten his jacket and sprints back up to Steve's room to grab it. The doorbell rings, and seeing as Steve thinks facing Neil head on is the best plan of action, establish that someone was *looking out* for Billy, he heads to the door and pulls it open.

"Steven! Hi. Is Billy ready to go?" Susan asks brightly from the door, the car running behind her.

Steve blinks for a few seconds, mouth halfway to saying something, before he nods, giving her a tight smile. "Yeah, uh. He just ran off the grab his jacket." Steve says, nodding.

Susan reciprocates it. "Was it a fun party?"

He scratches over his head, then looks around, "You know," he starts, then turns back to her as he hears Billy's thundering footsteps down the stairs, "it got cancelled. Thought I told everyone, but," Billy shoves past the both of them, "apparently not."

Susan blinks, sends Steve a tight smile, then turns to Billy. “Aren’t you going to say good-bye?”

Billy’s hands are on his head, as if he can’t figure out where Neil is. He looks over to Steve and forces out a particularly unkind, “Bye.”

She turns back to Steve. “That’s too bad. Thank you for having him, Steven.”

“Sure thing, Mrs. H.”

“Please, Steven. I told you, call me Susie.” She sends him another polite smile, then the car door slams. Billy is in the driver’s seat. “Have a good night!” She calls, waves, then walks back to the passenger side and slides in.

When Susan talks this time, Billy tries to answer. No use being on her bad side when she held the answer of wether or not he was going to get the shit kicked out of him tonight.

“Max had a lovely time out at The Wheeler’s tonight. They have a daughter your age, you know, her na—“

“She’s a cunt.”

Susan’s expression changes to one of worry, but internally, she

beams. “Why do you say that?”

Billy chews a thumbnail before he answers, “Cheated on a friend of mine. Kinda fucked him over.” He answers, eyes still steady ahead.

“Oh,” she sounds disappointed, “well, you know, she needs a second chance. Everyone does. She’s quite smart from what Karen said about her —“

“She’s a cunt, too.”

Susan’s stunned into silence for a moment. “*Karen* —“

“Yeah, *Karen*. Fuckin’ airheaded creep who couldn’t know her children less if she tried.”

She takes a moment to answer this time, opening and closing her mouth like a fish while she tried to find someone Billy didn’t seem to hate. “Ted —“

“Fuck him, too.”

“— isn’t very present.” She says, then glances over to him. “I feel sorry for the boy.”

“He doesn’t want your pity.”

In the end, Billy heads straight for his room and Susan spins some nervous tale about how it’d been so wild she was surprised the police didn’t show up. He’s drunk enough, apparently, to not see her nervous fidgeting, or the way her voice wavers.

4.

In December, when Billy and Max come home with report cards in their hands, Neil hangs Max’s up and leaves Billy’s forgotten on the counter.

When Susan is turning out the lights for the night, she posts Billy’s up beside her daughter’s.

5.

With nothing better to do one day in mid-February, Susan goes down into the cellar.

It’s viciously cold and dark down there, but she’s armed with a box of new bulbs and a spare shoe for bug-squashing. The lights, now working and turned on, don’t do much to help the cold but it’s a start. She spends her day going through old junk, soon to find there was a reason it was in the basement. Old plastic trophies or medals,

broken lamps, old porn mags, bulky trunks that didn't 'look nice' in the house. Susan had wanted to scoff when Neil said that. They'd moved in from a trailer park — nothing *looked nice*.

There are a few, though, and she takes her time deciding what was and wasn't worth keeping. It's the third trunk out of five that she opens when she finds it.

This trunk is by far the oldest, and it looks it. The clasps are rusted, the surface is all torn to bits and it's missing a handle. It doesn't want to open, no matter how much she begs it 'come on, *come on*,' so she ventures back into the house and pulls out a can of WD 40. After a little blast with that, the clasps pop up, and she's finally able to crack it open an hour after she'd first pulled it out.

There are two thick books — scrapbooks, she's willing to bet — and a smaller box, a few loose pictures and other random things in it. She reaches for the book first.

'*Happy 18th Birthday, Little B!'* the inner cover reads, *'I'm writing this note to you from the hospital bed. You're right beside me in your little bassinet, and every time I look over at you I cry a little more. I've waited so long to meet you, and I'm so happy you're here! I can't wait to make years and years of memories with you. I can't wait to watch you grow up and be the great man I know you will become. I have no doubts that you will make me the proudest woman to ever exist. I can't help that every time I look over at you, I love you a little more. I will thank God tonight for finally giving me my second half. I pray that your life has been full of adventure and the love you deserve. As for the rest of it, I'll give you what words I can.*

I hope that you learn to love with your whole heart. It is scary, and sometimes you give the wrong people your devotion. Don't let them see

you break, darling. Forgive, but do not forget. I hope that you follow your own path, because you will be clearing the way for hundreds to follow. Do not let terrible things make you like them. Give others as much as they give you. Know your worth. Live a life you will love to tell your grandchildren. When things feel helpless, no matter where I am, know that I'm with you.

I cannot wait to get to know you.

God bless you, Little B. I love you.

Your Ma'

To her credit, Susan has always been a crier. This, really, isn't all that different. She wipes her tears with the back of her hand, sniffles, then closes her eyes for a quick prayer.

She'd never known Pamela — obviously — and she'd hardly ever heard a squeak about her. Neil refused to have anything explicitly hers still in the house; the first time she'd ever experienced Neil striking his son was because the younger had brought an old note she'd written from California to Indiana. She imagines Pam was quite beautiful, probably the very image of a California girl. Billy looked noting like Neil, so she thought it was safe to assume it was her who had the blonde curls and sea blue eyes.

She blinks her eyes open, then turns the page. It's a pair of grey, tiny little footprints. Billy's full name is written below, his birth date and weight below that. The handwriting is neat cursive and quite obviously not her husband's. The next two dozen pages, almost half the book, are filled with neatly scrapbooked pictures. There isn't a terrible amount of decoration, and the blank space is filled with more cursive notes to her son.

A picture of a young boy giggling, covered in sand. The same boy beaming above the caption ‘First Day!’ A beautiful young woman sitting in her bathing suit beside her son, above the caption ‘Ma & Me Time!’

Susan gets about six pages deep before she feels a little guilty for looking through what should belong to Billy. She shuts the book and slides it against the second book, which she assumes is more pictures. There’s a small box filled with jewelry, other loose photos that perhaps she was planning on pasting in but passed before she had the chance. An Elvis vinyl,a folded up dress, pictures of a young Billy and his mother in frames.

She’s reminded, again, that this isn’t for her.

Her watch tells her it’s around four, which is perfect time for Billy to be home. Dusting her hands off on her pants, Susan stands and leaves the cellar. “Billy?” She calls from the front door. Not like she was expecting one, but there’s no answer.

“Asshole!” Max yells, and yeah, Billy is home. She rushes in, ready to pound on the door when she’s met with Max’s following laughter. Susan freezes, blinks to herself as she hears Max yell again, then the creak of bed springs.

“You gotta teach me how to do that,” Max says, and outside, her mother presses her door to the ear.

“Easy,” he shrugs, then grabs her arms and helps her up, “like this, come on.” Max scampers off the bed, moves to go around him so

she's facing his back. "Arm over my shoulder," Billy instructs, and Max grabs his right shoulder with her right arm. Billy, in turn, grabs it with his left, "grab," tugs her upwards, grabs the back of her head with his right, "grip the head,"and bends at his waist, "then flip." Rolling her over his back, Max lands on hers, bouncing on the bed springs. "Easy. Now you can take all your little nerd friends out."

"They're —" She was going to say not nerds, but she wasn't about to be so blatantly wrong in front of Billy.

"They're what?" He teases, and she sits up, kicks off her sneakers and throws them towards the door.

"They're *cool*," she finishes, giving him a look.

Billy laughs, then picks up a stray dart from his dresser, "Yeah, like soup."He flicks his wrist and the point just barely misses the newspaper cutout Reagan he'd taped over his dart board.

"That was lame."

"You're fucking lame."

"You play Dungeons & Dragons."

"I *spectate* Dungeons & Dragons," she specifies, because really, sitting in a basement for ten hours listening to Mike Wheeler narrate nerd

shit was really not her speed. “Besides, you might as well call yourself a spectator since you’re always nipping at Steve’s heels.”

“I do not *nip*.”

Max laughs at him. “Sure you don’t.” Billy gives her the finger. “Who’re you gonna be friends with next year when Steve goes to college?”

Billy takes a deep breath, looks around for another dart. “That, little sister, is none of your business.”

“Nancy?”

“Fuck no.”

“*Jonathan*?”

“Do I look like the kind of guy that Byers hangs around?” Billy asks flatly.

“Don’t exactly look like the type to hang around Steve, either.”

Outside, Susan presses her ear against the door harder.

“The fucks that supposed to mean?”

Max shrugs, “He’s all preppy. You’re not.”

“Steve is different.”

“Seriously, though. Who? You don’t have any other friends —“

“Hey —“

“It’s *true*,” she says, then kicks him in the leg — her foot is promptly shoved away as he looks for another dart to throw.

“Don’t worry about it.”

“Why?” She fires back, kicking out with her other leg, “‘Cause you won’t be here?”

Billy sends her a glare. “The fuck do you know about *that*?”

“You turn eighteen this summer.”

“And?”

Max shakes her head. “You ran away in California, that one time. Why wouldn’t you run away from a place you actually liked?”

Billy thinks for a second, deciding wether or not to tell her the truth. “Yeah,” he agrees, “It’s not really running away. I’ll be legal.”

“When?”

“The night of the eighth. July.”

“So I don’t even get to celebrate your birthday.”

“You can write me a card.”

“That’s *not* the same thing.”

“The fuck does it matter to you, anyway?” Susan hears another dart hit the board.

“Don’t really wanna wake up one morning and you’re just… gone.”

Billy swallows, uses the toe of his shoe to rub at a mark on the floor. “You’ll survive,” he sighs, then looks over at her and opens his mouth.

“I know,” she interrupts. “Anything happens and I call you.” Billy gives a slow nod, then pushes his hair back. “You’re going with Steve, right?”

“No one said anything about that.”

“No one had to.”

“The fuck is that supposed to mean?”

“Can you go two minutes without saying ‘fuck’?”

“Can you answer the Goddamn question?”

“Didn’t anyone ever tell you not to answer a question with a question?”

“Can you quit riding my jock?”

“Just admit you’re going with him.”

Billy turns, and pointedly explains, “I am not *going with* Steve.”

“I didn’t mean it like that! And even if I did —“ Billy fixes her with a look, and she abandons that thought. She knew the *truth*, anyway. Saying it between these walls was just a bigger deal. “Just that you guys…. are moving out there together.”

Billy huffs. “Yeah, maybe. I guess, if you wanna look at it like that.”

“What about school?”

“I’ll get my GED. Leaves more college money for you, anyway.”

Max’s lips twitch. Billy hits Reagan in the middle of the forehead. Susan thinks about pulling away.

“I’ll miss you.”

Billy huffs out an indigant laugh. “Gonna miss you too, kid.” He glances over at her, gives her a little smile. “You gonna come visit me?”

That puts a grin on her face. “Totally.”

Susan, finally, pulls away with a soft smile. She backs up a few steps and calls again, “Billy?”

“What?”

“Could you come help me down in the cellar?”

There’s a little talking from inside the room, before Billy is opening his door. Max shuffles out, heading to her own room before Billy exits. He gives a nod, and Susan leads him outside, right around to the cellar doors. “Well, you know, I was going through all the junk down here and I just… I don’t need help.” She admits, throwing her hands up.

Billy gives her a skeptical look.

“I found some old things and I think they’re supposed to belong to you,” she explains, wrapping her arms loosely around herself.

“We gonna keep talkin’ about them or are you gonna get on with it?” His tone isn’t as sharp as it would’ve been six months ago.

“Yeah,” she answers, nodding, “of course.” She leads him down the stairs, right over to the case. “It’s just… the things in here.”

Billy bends, opening it — then shutting it quickly.

“I won’t,” she says quickly, eyes wide, “say anything. He doesn’t come down here.”

It’s a moment before he relaxes. “Thanks.”

“I’ll leave you. For a bit,” she assures with a polite smile. She starts to leave, then pauses in the doorway. “Billy?” He looks up at her from where he’s now kneeling before the open box. “Would you mind… just taking Max out for ice cream or something tonight? I can give you the money, I’m just — not feeling so great from being down here all day, but I promised her —“

“Yeah,” he replies with a nod. “I can manage that.”

She gives him another, wider, smile. Max has plenty of time with her. Her time is winding down with Billy.

+1

The phone is ringing at nine, and it wouldn’t be weird if Billy or Steve had many friends around, or who would need to call so late.

“I got it!” Billy calls from the kitchen, abandoning the dishes and picking up the landline off the wall. “‘Ello?”

“Billy?” Max asks, and her voice is panicked, her breathing labored.

It's nice and warm, but her voice sends shivers down Billy's spine. "What? What'd he do?"

"Can — I don't know what to do, he hit — he hit my mom, Billy, a-and," she's struggling to breathe, and fucking hell he should have *known* better.

"Breathe," he begs, pinching the bridge of his nose. "Just — breathe, Max, okay? I'm gonna take care of everything. Where are you?"

"At the payphone, down the road. I snuck out."

"Were they fighting when you left?"

"No, no. She was in the bathroom, and he went into their room."

Billy gnaws at his lip. "Okay, okay. Tomorrow, you do whatever the fuck you can to keep the two of you out of the house, okay? Say you want to go to Indianapolis. O-or just go to a friend's house. You can call Will's mom and she'll understand, she'll distract Susan."

Max sniffles on the other end of the line. "Okay."

"I'm gonna fix everything, okay?"

He can hear Max swallow. "Okay," she repeats quietly.

“I gotta go now. You just stay out for as long as you can.”

“Billy?” She asks, after a moment.

“Tell me, kid.”

“I love you.”

Billy swallows, taps his thumb on the wall. “I know. I love you, too. Go home. Just stay out of his way for the night. And be safe.”

“Okay.”

“You got quarters if you need to call out again?”

“Yeah.”

“Good. Now get lost.”

She laughs a little humorlessly, gives up an “Okay,” then the line dies.

“Steve!” He calls, walking into their bedroom and immediately tossing the door of the bathroom open. “C’mon,” he says, ignoring Steve’s protests and shoving his hand into the shower, shutting off the water and shoving a towel into his hands. “I said come on, we gotta go!”

It’s four in the morning when Susan wakes up to a pounding on the door, nearly thirty six hours later.

“Hawkins Police!” They call. “Open up! We have a warrant for the arrest of Neil Hargrove!” She sits straight up in bed, looking over to the man beside her. The look in his eyes is feral, and he turns to Susan.

“Relax.” His words are eerily calm. He gets out of bed, pulls on a robe, and pads out to the front door.

Susan pads behind him, and she can see Max’s door is cracked. She waves Max out, and the girl latches onto her mother’s side.

The two of them watch as Neil slides the chain off, then flicks the lock, eventually pulling the door open. “Officer?”

“Sheriff,” he corrects, and Max’s face lights up when Jim’s face comes into the low light. He grabs one of Neil’s arms, and forces him around. “You’re under arrest on multiple accounts of child abuse, neglect, and domestic battery. You have the right to remain silent —“

“Excuse me!” Neil shouts, struggling as the Sheriff cuffs him and begins leading him outside. “I’ve never —“ He’s cut off when he’s led into the drive, and Max sees what he’s fallen silent at.

“Billy!” It’s only been a few weeks, but it may as well have been years with the way Max tears away from her mother’s side and sprints out of the house, down the stairs and across the dirt. She runs straight to Billy’s waiting hug where he’s kneeling.

“Told you I’d take care of it.”

Their moment doesn’t last long, not when it’s broken by Neil’s enraged screaming. “— fucking faggot! I did everything I could to fix you, boy, and this is how you repay me?!” Billy stands, and Max steps over to hug Steve. “She’d be disappointed in you, you know that?! She didn’t die so that you could grow up a *fairy* —“

Billy rushes at him, and Steve nearly trips over his own shoes trying to hold him back. It takes effort from both Hopper and Steve to keep the Hargrove men from tearing one another’s throats out, but Steve manages to get in between them.

“You know,” he says, whispering in Billy’s ear as they struggle against one another. “You know the truth. She said it herself, remember? She’s *proud*, and she’s *with* you —“ Billy relaxes, and Steve turns him around. “We’re fine,” he assures, hugging him tightly.

Hop shoves Neil Hargrove into the back of his truck with less care than he should exercise. He steps over to make sure everyone is

alright, and upon Steve's confirmation, he walks over to assure Mrs. Hargrove that he'll be back at a more appropriate hour to deal with the technicalities. As he pulls away, Susan finally steps out. Max tugs on Billy's shirt, then nods over to his step-mother. He makes the first move.

"You—"

"I know, okay?" He asks, blinking at her. "I know. And — I know. Why you never spoke up against him."

Just hearing it makes her heart ache, and she covers her mouth with a dainty hand.

"You can do it," he assures, reaching out to hold her shoulders. "You and Max. You can handle that. Joyce can help you get a job, a-and you don't have to live like that." He swallows, takes a long pause. "I'm gonna testify. If you would —" She cuts him off with a wave, then pulls him in a hug. It's the first time they've ever hugged.

"Thank you, Billy. Thank you."